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[Report from Esther Raushenbush to the Board of Trustees, March 19, 1969]

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March 19, 1969

TO THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

I

I think it will take a longer report than I can now write you, or you will want to read, to deal with the underlying causes of the sit-in at Westlands. But let me try to say something that makes sense.

In the first place, the sit-in was not the whole story, nor the students in Westlands the only ones involved in the activities of March 4-14. The number of students in Westlands varied greatly in the course of the ten days: some went in and came out in a few days, others went in and out during the whole time. A relatively small number remained there the whole time, and, I think, determined the attitudes that prevailed there. But several hundred students were in one way or another involved in the discussions that took place.

As you know, there was no show of violence; the students took great care of the White Room; they vacuum-cleaned the carpets in the halls daily; finally they had access to the most important offices in the College but did not touch any of the papers.

The activities inside and outside Westlands were evidence of a changed attitude on the part of many students toward education. We cannot ignore this.

The error we have made--and I am the first to have made it--is that we assumed that the care and concern we have had for students for forty years established a set of relations that could be counted on in time of conflict. That has happened before--there was no cleavage between the administration, the faculty, and the students when McCarthy and Jenner descended on the College. But this time there are new factors which will have to be faced by those who have, either as faculty members, or administrators, or trustees, given great thought and great support to a kind of education that has, for all its particular shortcomings, been more humane, more dedicated to serious intellectual and personal growth than is to be found in most places across the land.

These protesting students, at their best, are appreciative of this education, even when they are critical of it. But every day they are bombarded in the news with evidence of the world's failure to deal with human misery, poverty, deprivation; and their ordinary life as well as their education has brought them in closer contact with these aspects of life than ever their parents were, at the impulsive and

impressionable age of these students. This is central to what is bothering the best of them.

Many simplistic reasons are given for their rebellion: that it is the rebellion of adolescents who are not very stable--and some of this is true; that it is criticism of their specific education--and some of this is true, too; that in the tuition explosion they are resisting the extra cost of education to their parents--and this, too, is partly true, but a very little part. It is also said that they are victims of an SDS conspiracy; and while the influence of the SDS is certainly there, and effective in a particular way, it is by no means the explanation.

The tuition increase was a trigger. All the issues brought out in the ten days had been brought out before--but the fact of the tuition increase gave them a platform on which to stand, and brought them further along the road they were going.

It cut into their concern about a diversified student body--it would become more and more impossible for anyone to come here who was not rich, they said; and a college of only highly privileged students could not be a good college in these days, was their view.

A second issue was the purposes of the black students, who, here as everywhere, were not about to be satisfied to try to forget their blackness (as many black students before them wanted to do) because more and more black people believe only by recognizing and dealing with their blackness can they even approach the freedom they want. The tie-up gave them a chance to put their sense of their needs into form--and they used it well. None of the black students sat in; and most of them were opposed to the sit-in. They wanted to be heard.

A third issue was the relation of students to administrators and faculty. There is no question that these relations here are and have been better than in most places--but the students were impatient with the processes of change, and they used this occasion to dramatize their conviction (right or wrong) that the processes of change must go faster than we were making them go.

A fourth issue is the image of the College as a refuge from the world, as against a way of living in the world. I have said many times in the past few years that, however much we would like to protect our children and provide such a refuge they will not tolerate it. Everything about their lives--even, and especially, perhaps, the most favored of them--gives them first-hand sight of the world. The war, and their friends who are involved in it, or trying to keep out of it; not only the sight of poverty but our lamentable failure, in spite of some heroic efforts, to deal with it in a timespan they can understand; inequities

most of us as adults have lived with all our lives, and, even in the midst of them, have failed to see fully, they see and are torn by. Take my own case: I have been in education all my life and have devoted myself to discovering how the humanistic values, the qualities of human personality, the talents and intellectual abilities of bright students can flower best in education, and I have paid no attention--none at all--to the stupidity, the political manipulation, the lack of imagination, of the education of the millions of young people who have been silent until now, but who now are making themselves heard. Our students hear them as we did not. And they see evidence of what might be done, and they think we should do more of it than we do. (Just as an illustration: I remind you that four years ago we took 60 students from the poverty areas of our neighboring towns, tutored them during the year and brought them to the campus for eight weeks each year for study. They are now ready for college. None or very few of them were even on the "college bound" track of their inferior schools. Now more than a dozen have already been admitted to good colleges. It was a small but important salvage operation, and our students have seen this.) To satisfy many of our students, Sarah Lawrence must serve a bigger purpose in this field. A tuition increase, even when it was no hardship to them at all, was a step back from the chance to do this.

One final thing: There is a great deal of confusion in them in the controversy over "elitism" they talk about, which mixes up the question of intellectual or academic quality with the question of social change and social justice. Many of them talk against "elitism" because they don't want the College to confine itself to an elite social class; others think the academic standards of the College will effectively prevent some of the students they think should come here to help create the "diversity" they talk about from coming. This is something the faculty has to work at with them. Many people (indeed, obviously, almost all of us) even those who believe a student body with mixed economic and ethnic backgrounds will make a better college these days than a perfectly homogeneous student body, believe diversity will do no good in this College if it lowers the quality of education the College gives. So if we were to seek greater diversity, it would have to be with students who could do well the work of the College. Some think we should create diversity even though the intellectual quality is impaired. This is a problem all institutions who are dealing with this question must solve, and I feel sure the College would not in any case, solve it by lowering standards. We have already taken steps to help such students by working with the Cooperative College Center in Mount Vernon, and this is something that is appropriate for us to do.

These remarks are intended to give you some picture of the background of the sit-in and the other activities of the week.

II

THE PROCESS

Why Sarah Lawrence?

I do not think the motivations for the protest as they relate to the College were the same as the motivations in other places. A great many of the things students are demanding in other places these students have--a large voice in their education; communication with teachers; a chance to do independent work in which they have a choice--many kinds of help. They are not numbers, or nameless faces. They are critical of the College, but not because of the kind of college it is; they do not reject the College--they value it. When the rumor got around that I would suspend everyone in Westlands somebody came to me and said, "Please don't do anything just now; they don't want to be suspended; they want to be here". That was the day they came out.

Who were these students? Some of them were among our best students --the most involved with their studies, the most intelligent. This is true of the leaders of the group. Some of them are personally very vulnerable, and this is one thing that worried me about them. They are, some of them, sensitive and difficult people. Some people have said they are a lot of neurotics. It isn't so; there was certainly neurotic behavior in this matter, and some of them do have problems and were trying to project their problems on to the immediate situation. There is no doubt about that. But it would be as wrong to say this was the cause as to say the SDS was the cause; it is an over-simple explanation.

Let me say who they were:

In those ten days the campus was divided among five groups of students, and I think I know their stands:

1. The black students. These students are on the march. They are not militant in the bad sense, although they might become so. They have a strong sense of the possibility of education for them here; and they are not about to lose their identity in other groups. The only way, they feel, for black students to have what black students need, is to have at least part of their education directed to their particular needs, not as people, but as blacks. Their demands sound overblown; and they are. But some of them can and should be met, and in meeting them we will teach other students something they need to know about the black civilization

in this country. They sent an extravagant, but clearly thought-out document--I have sent it to you. Compared with what they worked out the Westlands group was fuzzy and ill-informed. We have started--or rather speeded up--work relating to black studies, because it is important to do so, not for their sakes, but for the College's.

2. The Westlands group was a variable number, with, I think, about twenty-five adamant--and perhaps increasingly adamant--members; but I am not sure of the number. They did a great deal of pressuring to keep other students in, and to get other students back in who left. By the time the matter ended, even some of their most ardent supporters were disillusioned with them. They were not controlled in what they wanted, by the SDS, but I think they were controlled in their methods. The discipline that kept them together, I think, was SDS discipline. The quality of the language of what they said was given them by SDS. But they did not fall for SDS destructiveness and they worked independently of SDS much of the time, I am told. This interpretation of what happened is conjecture, but this is how it seemed to me.

3. There was a third group--a very large group, much of the time--who met and discussed the College, and education, and what they wanted, a great deal during that period. They were sympathetic with many of the things the Westlands group talked about, and were a supporting factor. This is the group, I think, who would have fled to the support of the Westlands sitters if we had taken drastic action against them. That group, unlike the Westlands group, talked with faculty. They were more available, but they, too, wanted the College to find ways to broaden its base of students, and they, too, wanted changes in the curriculum. But it was possible to talk with them.

4. There was another, smaller, group of students--moderates who made no extravagant claims, who wanted to get the facts, who reviewed all the College had been doing, who tried very hard to find ways in which the student body could be united for the future they wanted. In the end this might turn out to be a really influential group.

5. Finally there were what I will call the "conservators"--the students who feel, as I am sure many of our alumnae feel, and you may feel, that the College was and is a fine place that should continue in the way and with the image it has always had. And whatever happens, it is important that changes that do have to be made should not undermine the qualities that have made it important for so many people.

III

THE FACULTY

This event has shaken the faculty and, as with the rest of us, has made it necessary to think hard about all the matters about education that we have been saying needed review, and about the new factors--especially the intense involvement of the students--that will affect what happens now. We cannot avoid two things: financial factors will affect the style of education here; and demands for new curriculum, for better ways of teaching students with new demands will make the faculty have to reassess their work and their style of teaching as well. It has been two weeks of keeping classes going as well as the intensity of the situation permitted--and there was a great range in the ability of the faculty to keep their work on an even keel. The faculty has been meeting and is in the process of deciding what can be done in the way of academic changes that both many faculty and students think we must make.

IV

THE ADMINISTRATION

We moved into the President's House, took over all the rooms, and carried on our business as well as possible. I received the "demands" of the Westlands group, of which you had copies. As you know, most of the things they talked about--how the committees should be run, what proportion of what kind of students should be admitted, whether we should do away with the tenure system--are matters that have to be discussed in the faculty. I called an all-College meeting, not wanting to respond to the Westlands group but to the whole College, which had received their document; and I answered those matters that could be answered. The Chairman sent a statement outlining the function of the Board of Trustees, and this went to everybody also, clarifying for many people the role of the faculty and administration, and the role of the trustees. We kept up as much communication with the students as possible.

As to dealing directly with the Westlands group, to get them out--this seemed to me a very serious matter of timing. I knew, as other

presidents have found, that moving in on them at the wrong time could galvanize student feeling in their behalf and cause disaster. As time went on they became anxious about what was to happen, as did students outside. On Thursday night the rumor was all over campus that I was going to call the police. Three faculty members called to ask me about it and when I told them I was not going to, they asked if they could officially inform the students and I said they could. By Friday I thought feelings outside had calmed down enough for me to attempt to enter the building. I sent a note in the morning saying I would come to the building at 10:30, that I wanted them to clear the building by then and have the doors open. I did go, but was not admitted. Instead a note repeating three of their "demands". My intention was to return home, send them a warning note that if they did not clear out I would act to suspend them. I was asked to wait until I had another message from them. At about four o'clock, four of the Westlands girls came to the house. They had abandoned their tuition request, and all the other requests except that "one-third of the entering class this fall should be people from working-class homes". They wanted me to "make a commitment for the College" to this effect. I told them I thought an able student body from a variety of economic and racial backgrounds was a desirable thing, and I wanted us to have that, but that it would be impossible to make the commitment they asked--we had neither the money nor the applications for that. They went away--and the next thing we heard was that they planned to leave Westlands that evening, which they did.

What comes next?

I'm not sure. In many ways the experience was one that bound people together, and made them concerned about each other. I think the students will not give up their propaganda for changes they want in the College. This is not alone a Sarah Lawrence matter, nor this "sit-in" an isolated thing. The event has galvanized all parties. I think it is making everybody think hard, and I am hopeful that the thinking will give the College the kind of educational direction it needs at this time.